Introduction

This project will protect one of the largest remaining tracts of privately owned property (1,028 acres) in the Upper Methow watershed. The site provides critical shrub-steppe habitat and links to existing public lands and private conserved (conservation easement) land to provide critical wildlife movement corridors. Without protection, the site will be sub-divided and sold for residential development.

Ecological and Biological Characteristics

The Bigger Picture: The Methow River watershed is perhaps the most intact and ecologically functional drainage in eastern Washington, supporting a unique and diverse assemblage of fish and wildlife species. Biological diversity reaches its zenith in the low elevation shrub-steppe, dry forest, and deciduous riparian habitats. Currently, these critical habitats are grossly underrepresented in the existing protected land base, and face imminent threat from development and fragmentation. Conserving natural communities and the associated rich biodiversity is a primary focus of several planning efforts including Washington's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, the Washington Biodiversity Conservation Strategy, the Washington Habitat Connectivity Analysis, the Okanogan Ecoregional Assessment, and the Methow Subbasin Plan. This project also addresses objectives in federal and state listed species recovery and management plans, such as the State of Washington Wolf Conservation and Management Plan and Management Recommendations for Washington's priority habitats: managing shrub-steppe in developing landscapes. The project site has been identified as a priority for conservation by several groups, including local citizens' conservation groups, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Methow Conservancy. Its priority status is based on its size, proximity to other protected land, habitat, and risk of development should funding not materialize.

Uniqueness and Significance: The project site includes one of the largest remaining privately-owned properties in the Methow Valley. The site is adjacent to large tracts of public land to the north and east and conserved (conservation easement) private land and public land that extends to the west. The project site represents a "doughnut hole" in what would otherwise be a nearly continuous stretch of protected land that extends from the opposite side of the valley, across the Methow River, through the shrub-steppe hillsides of the project site, and up to higher elevation conifer forests. By protecting this land, the project contributes to an essential wildlife movement corridor. In addition, the diverse habitats represented in this larger protected corridor provide for habitat for a large range of wildlife species and for species that require several types of habitats, such as gray wolves, mountain lion, mule deer, and bats.

Fish and Wildlife Species and Communities: The project targets shrub-steppe and associated riparian draws and wetlands and the species that utilize these areas, as well as species that use the site as a travel corridor between lower elevation riparian habitat along the Methow River and upper elevation conifer forests. Some of the wildlife species that will benefit from protection of this project site include gray wolves, mule deer, mountain lions, badgers, dusky grouse, western bluebirds, and Brewer's sparrows.

Quality of Habitat: The project site contains an expansive area of undeveloped shrub-steppe habitat with bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue, bitterbrush, sage, and several lomatium and buckwheat species. Scattered ponderosa pine are present in some areas. Riparian draws are dominated by aspen and dogwood, and wetlands are dominated by sedges. Historic grazing has resulted in some changes to the shrub-steppe and riparian communities, with annual grasses and weeds, such as knapweed, mustard, and whitetop, present in some areas. However, as part of this project, any future

grazing would use a conservation-oriented approach designed to reduce non-native grasses and weeds and increase the abundance of native bunchgrasses. Cattle would be fenced out of the riparian draws and wetlands. This type of grazing approach has been successful at increasing the abundance of native bunchgrasses in several other areas, such as the eastern Sierra Nevadas. The 2014 Carlton Complex fire burned through the riparian draws on the site, and these areas are now experiencing dense growth of young aspen, dogwood, and birch. In the uplands, fire effects include a reduction in bitterbrush cover and increase in bunchgrass.

Species and Communities with Special Status

Priority Species: This proposal will benefit 20 priority species and habitats, including federal and state-listed species (see Attachment J). Targeted shrub-steppe, riparian, and wetland communities are state priority habitats, and are vital for a number of imperiled species, including gray wolves and sharp-tailed grouse. Gray wolf packs have been documented in the Methow Valley in recent years, and the project site contains suitable habitat for the species. Perhaps more importantly, the site provides critical mule deer habitat, and mule deer are the target prey of gray wolves. In addition, note that the project area has been a historic lek area for the state-threatened sharp-tailed grouse and the site is a potential re-introduction area for the species. Note that the after-effects of the 2014 Carlton Complex on the site have improved sharp-tailed grouse breeding habitat by reducing bitterbrush density and favoring bunchgrasses; and improved wintering habitat by rapid sprouting and growth of birch and aspen in the riparian draws.

Immediacy of Threat to Species/Communities: Shrub-steppe has declined throughout Eastern Washington, with over 60% having been converted to other uses. Remaining tracts suffer from fragmentation and are vulnerable to development, overgrazing, and agricultural conversion. The Methow Valley has been identified as the second most-endangered watershed in the state because of intense development pressure. The Lehman Uplands landowner has stated that without conservation easement funding, he will subdivide and sell his land to residential development. Zoning allows for the site to be subdivided into as many as 51 lots. This would have drastic consequences to the habitat and the wildlife species that currently use the area.

Importance of Habitat Acquisition: Existing development ordinances are woefully inadequate to protect shrub-steppe habitat and their dependent wildlife species from the identified threats. Not enough protected shrub-steppe habitat currently exists to maintain existing biodiversity. Acquisition and linkage of parcels that serve as wildlife movement corridors and intact habitat are an important strategy in several planning and recovery efforts. The Lehman Uplands conservation easement will protect one of the largest pieces of private, undeveloped shrub-steppe habitat in the valley and will secure critical habitat and a critical wildlife movement corridor. Note that although sharp-tailed grouse currently do not regularly occur on the project site, the site is considered a potential re-introduction area for the species.

Ecological roles: The project site provides critical mule deer habitat. Mule deer are key prey of wolves (and mountain lions) and the interaction of these species exerts a trophic cascade effect that increases biodiversity and improves habitat condition.

Taxonomic Distinctness: The gray wolf is a taxonomically distinct species with no sub-species. The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse is one of six described subspecies of sharp-tailed grouse.

Rarity: Although still rare, the population of gray wolves has been increasing in Washington State in recent years. In 2015, there were at least 90 wolves, 18 packs, and eight breeding pairs in the state (WDFW Annual Survey of Wolves 2015). Most of the wolf packs are located in northeastern Washington. The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse is the rarest of the six described subspecies of

sharp-tailed grouse and persists in seven scattered populations (WDFW Columbia Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery Plan 2012). The current range of this subspecies is only about 2.8% of its historical range in Washington. The statewide population estimate was as low as 472 in 2001, and with the aid of translocations and habitat restoration, increased to about 902 in 2011.

Management and Viability

Immediacy of threat: Threat to the project site is imminent in the absence of easement funding. The landowner had the property listed for sale but has agreed to take the property off the market for the length of the WWRP funding cycle. If conservation easement funding does not materialize, he will immediately subdivide and sell his land for residential development. Zoning allows for the site to be subdivided into as many as 51 lots. This development would have drastic consequences to the habitat and the wildlife species that currently use the area. Under the conservation easement, no development would occur on the site and any grazing would be conducted using a conservation-oriented grazing approach that would reduce weeds, increase bunchgrasses, and improve habitat conditions on the land (see Attachment K).

Long-term viability: The current zoning on the site is 20-acre minimum lot size with residential development permitted. Under the conservation easement, the landowner will still manage the lands, but under the guidelines of the conservation easement and a conservation-oriented grazing management plan approved by the Methow Conservancy. The grazing approach will increase habitat quality of the site and will serve as an example that other grazers in the surrounding area, such as leases of the adjacent WDFW land, may follow. In this way, not only the Lehman Uplands site, but other surrounding grazed lands, could improve in habitat quality. Note that no development will occur on the Lehman Uplands project site. The Methow Conservancy will monitor the site annually to ensure that the easement and grazing management guidelines are met. No other human or financial resources are needed.

Ongoing Stewardship: The conservation-oriented grazing approach is expected to result in a reduction in weeds on the property. As needed, the Methow Conservancy will work with the landowner to seek NRCS and other funds to control noxious weeds and detrimental invasive species.

Livestock Grazing Uses: As mentioned above, any grazing on the property will be conducted using a conservation-oriented grazing approach with local ranchers (see Attachment K).

Public Benefit and Support

Project support: The project has received support from a broad cross-section of the local community, as evidenced in our community focus groups, as well as from the WDFW. Attachment I of this application provides a letter of support from local farmers and ranchers. WWRP Critical Habitat funds will be used to leverage additional dollars from the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement program or the WWRP Farmland Protection program.

Educational and scientific value: The site has the potential to serve as a research project documenting changes in habitat from utilization of a conservation-oriented grazing management approach. The Methow Conservancy has worked with University of Washington graduate students to conduct research on other conservation easements, and such research could readily occur on the project site, whether through the University of Washington, Washington State University, or other university. Note that the site is easily accessed from the towns of Winthrop and Twisp.